Original Paper

The Analysis of English Classroom Test in Senior High School

Qi Qinyi[1]

[1] School of Foreign Language, Nanjing Southeast University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

Abstract

Teaching and testing have been two crucial elements in education. They are complementary and mutually influential. As a part of senior high school English teaching, English language testing has been important in gauging students' competence. Scientific and reliable classroom teaching tests and assessments can effectively help teachers achieve objectives, change pedagogical approaches, and continuously innovate their methods. Through the use of questionnaires and data gathered from 40 English teachers from senior high school, this paper found that there are still many problems in the senior high school English classroom tests, which are mainly manifested by arbitrary test planning, lack of logic and stratification in questions proposal as well as insufficient research on the washback. The reasons for this situation are mainly due to factors like teachers' scant understanding of the educational function of classroom tests、the irrationality of the existing evaluation mechanism and inadequate knowledge of students. practical suggestions are made in this regard in order to maximize the value of English classroom assessments zzand facilitate a productive English teaching and learning environment in the future.

Keywords

classroom test, English teaching, senior high school, suggestion

1. Introduction

There is interdependence between language teaching and language testing. The content and effectiveness of curriculum can be assessed through testing, while the feedback received from testing can enhance the quality of teaching or improve the curriculum (Zou, 2005). Since the majority of English language tests are intended for teachers and students in academic settings, it is crucial to take the impact of a test on instruction into account when utilizing it for a specific purpose. Whether it is a small classroom test or a large-scale examination, the arrangement of test content, the distribution of test questions and the criteria of marking will cause washback effect, which can be positive or negative. A classroom test, typically referred as a test or an exercise that is only completed during class, is an

approach used by teachers to assess their students' understanding of what they have learned and their own teaching proficiency in their recent teaching process with the process of identifying any deficiencies or problems in language acquisition (Wu, 2002). This kind of in-class test has always been known for its concise and diverse forms, flexible operation, convenience, and efficiency. A good English classroom test can not only benefit students in many aspects, but also enable teachers to continuously innovate teaching (Bachmann, 1999). But due to the influence of examination-oriented education in the reality, many teachers directly apply the method of large-scale examination to classroom teaching practice, so the classroom test does not really play a role in scientific and reasonable evaluation, which brings many adverse effects to professional development of teachers themselves and the long-term development of students' English language learning. At the same time, more attention in China has been paid to the research on the systematic study of large-scale tests, such as college English level 4 and 6 tests, college entrance examination English tests and so on, while there are few studies on classroom quiz, which is also an important means of evaluation.

Based on the relevant theories of English classroom testing, this study aims at discovering existing problems of it in the senior high school and through the analysis of data collected from teachers' practical cases, the corresponding improvement strategies are given to provide references for scientific and reliable test design in the future. Psychological factors, combination of process evaluation and final evaluation and washback research will also be introduced into the study in order to promote the development of English education and teaching.

2. Literature Review

An in-class test is a small quiz that is taken after each lesson. This test has small portions and short duration. The items are mainly to review the current and previous knowledge (Liu & Han, 2000). It can display a more objective and fair evaluation of students' ability and give instant feedback that can help teachers adjust teaching plan and teaching methods in time. Fulcher (2010) concluded that although classroom tests play an important role in teacher teaching and curriculum evaluation, their ultimate goal is to promote student learning through teaching.

As a phenomenon in language learning, the classroom tests have been characterized by many researchers. It is ongoing, interactive, diagnostic, educational, flexible, and instantaneous. They also pointed out that the score of 80 or more on the diagnostic test is an effective incentive for students to learn (Frederickson & Collins, 1989). Based on the corpus, Jia and Long (2005) summarized that due to its inherent flexibility and convenience, the classroom test usually consists of one or more types of questions, which depends on the type of lesson. Those questions can be designed different from formal examination patterns and prevent students from becoming bored with the tests and enhance their interest in learning. Besides, factors such as time arrangement, the difficulty level of assignment and the number of students have also been considered (Yang, 2005). In subjective testing, teachers can test the whole group for small class sizes, which is impractical for regular teaching in large scale classes.

This requires teachers to group students in advance according to ability and to plan a maximum sample size to ensure that the actual language use of students at different levels can be tested relatively objectively within the context of the sample (Liu & Han, 2000). When these aspects have been considered, the reliability and validity should also be emphasized. Although this type of test is not as influential as the large-scale examination, it is important to take both validity and reliability issues into account so that the results of the test can be a scientific reflection of the students' actual English level. For the evaluation, specific rules should be developed to avoid too much subjective arbitrariness, especially in the assessment of some subjective tests like writing and speaking. The feedback of the tests should be given in-class as far as possible so that students can keep abreast of their knowledge. At the same time, teachers should do a proper and simple statistical analysis to better guide and implement the next phase of teaching in class (Li, 1997).

But in response to the heightened understanding of the nature of language, Bachmann (2005) proposed the Communicative Language Ability (CLA) model combining knowledge of the language with the features of the context. It consists of language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. These three areas are not simply juxtaposed, but are rather interactive in a dynamic process (Liu & Han, 2000), thus leading to the emergence of the Comprehensive Language Proficiency Test (CLPT). In recent years, with the development of communicative language teaching, more and more attention has been paid to CLA. Therefore, the concept of communicative language testing should also be used in English in-class tests, so as to focus on the application of language knowledge in students' daily activities and promote the comprehensive development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Liu & Han, 2000).

It is obvious that the above research of classroom tests mainly concentrate on the macro level. The actual situation in the senior high school classroom is not presented. In this study, the status of classroom tests in senior high school and teachers' understanding towards it will be analyzed. The corresponding suggestions will also be given to advance the English teaching.

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the situation of classroom tests usage and teachers' perception of it, a questionnaire was conducted in the first stage to collect quantitative data by selecting answers and the open-ended questions were also provided in it to encourage teachers to display more details about items and their opinions. The questionnaire was designed on the software Wen Juanxing and then posted online.

The participants were 40 English teachers from senior high schools and valid number of the questionnaires was 37. After gathering the data, Excel was also utilized to provide the summary data and aid in a clearer analysis of the outcomes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

After analyzing the data, it is visible that the in-class tests are recognized by teachers. Because all the teachers regularly took tests and according to the second item of questionnaire, the majority of teachers held a positive view towards classroom test at 92% and 95% of them thought that classroom tests and teaching are interdependent. But question 4 to 9 showed that most of them don't have a reasonable understanding of the preparation, organization, implementation and post-testing process. 89% of them included only 1 or 2 kinds of objective tasks like multiple choice in the in-class tests. (The table 1.1 displays the types of the task item they used.) They seldom let students answer subjective questions and apply knowledge into practice, since only 2 teachers made class activities like role play into tests. Even though teachers have mentioned that lesson objectives, textbooks, syllabus and students' level were the influential factors considered in the design, 29 teachers showed preference for questions directly from the existing papers or exercise books and designed tests only in 1-5 days.

Table 1.1 Usage of Test Items in Classroom Tests

Task type	Number of teachers
Multiple choice	30
True/False	27
Gap filling	19
Dictation	26
Essay or report writing	9
Role play	2

In regards to the time arrangement of the tests, a significant number of teachers (only 12% of those with reasonable timetables) showed a casual approach and didn't have a clear plan about it in the mind, failing to integrate the tests into classroom teaching and only treating them as an additional part of teaching. For the development of students' skills, 2% of teachers chose listening, 9% chose speaking, 51% chose reading and 38% chose "writing". The focus of most teachers on reading and writing training would have a serious impact on the development of students' overall language skills.

In common with the various large-scale tests, many teachers set questions for the classroom tests based on the level of average students. The standardized classroom tests without different levels are not conducive to motivating and protecting students who are less able to accept knowledge. And it is evident that backwash study can be an assist of English teaching. However, the answer of the last question demonstrated that the percentage of teachers conducting post testing effects studies was only 46% and conveyed a message that insufficient awareness of the importance of tests and lack of washback research still exist.

4.2 Reasons and Suggestions

In conclusion, the situation with regard to classroom assessments in senior high school is that teachers have a propensity to mistake small-scale assessments for large-scale assessments, using the latter's original questions and scoring system as the only criterion for measuring students' language ability and unilaterally developing students' language skills. The next section discusses a few of the causes.

4.2.1 Limited Awareness of the Educational Function of Classroom Tests

The strength of test questions should be reflected in the potential to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their language ability by finishing a language task (Heaton, 2000). For even small-scale tests like classroom tests, teachers need to know the whole process and requirements of the test (Liu & Han, 2000). Otherwise, the diagnostic function of classroom tests will fail.

Due to the lack of understanding of the classroom tests and the lack of systematic theoretical knowledge, most of the questions in the classroom tests are proposed from teachers' own subjective intention or even simply selected from a few papers, which were used in the other kinds of tests, thus making it difficult to guarantee the scientific nature and the quality of the test. And as the result shows, the time arrangement about this kind of test is so arbitrary that the test becomes optional. That is to say, the time used for the test is not equal to the content of tests, thus under most circumstances making test contents conflict with the teaching lectures. In addition, the single type of items in the test leads to students' boredom and is not conducive to the development of overall language skills and the multiple-choice that is preferred by teachers facilitates guesswork and does not reflect students' real language skills.

In this way, when setting the teaching goal, classroom tests should first be included as an equipment to combine long-term with short-term planning, thus making teaching consistent and systematic. The ultimate goal of in-class tests is to identify problems and improve teaching. Therefore, teachers should establish a strong sense of optimizing teaching through problems discovered in the backwash study on classroom tests and foster the improvement of students' skills. Meanwhile, a more flexible and varied approach to testing should be adopted to adapt to the needs of classroom teaching and students' actual levels, thus differentiating them from large-scale tests. For example, in vocabulary classroom tests, teachers can focus on basic vocabulary from spelling to application. There are a variety of tests to test students' mastery, such as filling in the blank based on explanation or context, substitution and so on. For example:

According to the following situations, use one or two sentences with the words you have learnt in the passage to describe it.

You want to introduce pandas to foreigners in the zoo. What will you say?

Although the vocabulary assessment in the large-scale test is relatively single, teachers can develop a variety of effective accompanying tests based on the actual teaching practice, which has laid a good foundation for the absorption of new vocabulary. Apart from it, the validity should also be considered when designing items. As the accompanying test for teaching evaluation, the selection of test materials

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should focus on the correlation with the teaching content and the students' application of the language in practice. The items should also be representative, so as not to become a proficiency test, thus making the accompanying test have a high degree of validity.

4.2.2 Unreasonable Evaluation Mechanism

In teaching practice, teachers still mostly pay more attention to the results, but less attention to the students' responses to the test and the process of independent learning (Hughes, 2003). The evaluation is overall uncomprehensive and unreasonable and lacks specific guidance. This kind of superficial evaluation ignores the recognition of students' knowledge mastery process, and makes some students lose the motivation to learn. Therefore, the post evaluation of the in-class test should not only pay attention to the results, but also to the process. Students' interest and attitude in participating in teaching and testing activities, their confidence in language learning, their habit of independent thinking, their awareness of cooperation and communication, and their level of development of language cognition all need to be considered.

Consequently, when evaluating the grades, based on the diagnostic characteristics of the accompanying test, the criterion-referenced way should be the center. For subjective questions, detailed scoring rules can be formulated to reduce the subjectivity of scoring. In the speaking test, analytical method can be adopted to break down the scoring in terms of the appropriateness of language use, the proper use of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and the clarity of language expression and so on. Developing a standard through the teaching objectives instead of determining a fixed grade, teachers can protect the enthusiasm of students and make learning a service to teaching.

4.2.3 Inadequate Knowledge of the Students

In teaching and testing practice, due to the influence of conventional thinking, the position between the tester and the test-taker is in most cases unequal. Throughout the testing process, the former tends to from his or her own perspective and sometimes even completely ignores the individual characteristics, thus making it difficult to achieve the expected function of the classroom test. The best solution is to stratify the test design, taking A/B paper or put optional questions in the paper so that the potential of students at different levels of ability can be brought into full play. For example, in the vocabulary teaching, in order to test the effect of vocabulary teaching, teachers can let the backward students in this lesson only master the spelling and for the students who have the ability to learn more, they can be asked to take some tests on the application of word formation and sentence construction. Through this method, the teacher can easily and timely find out the vocabulary mastery of different students and without influencing some students' confidence.

In recent years, with the continuous development of psychological research, there is increasing interest in the influence of psychological factors on testing. Bachman (1999) argued that apart from language ability which affects test performance, other factors have been found to influence testing, mainly including test methods and individual characteristics of the test taker. Although the teacher has no control over these individual elements, she can nonetheless influence them to improve the test

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performance of her students. Positive and negative mentalities will undoubtedly have a very significant impact on test results (Tan, 2013). Teachers can motivate students to engage in classroom tests in the same way as they do at the warming-up stage of classroom teaching. They can create a relaxed testing atmosphere with words of appreciation or some positive psychological hints or design diversified and interesting question to ease pressure. Secondly, teachers should undertake a good job of guidance so that students are able to realize the importance of the classroom test for large-scale testing. The purpose of classroom teaching is not only simple knowledge learning, but also for the future of certain tests to prepare for the selection or terminal assessment tests.

5. Conclusion

Reliable and valid classroom test provides a reasonable basis for the formulation of curriculum, which can not only maximize the achievement of teaching goals, but also help students to improve their own learning methods and efficiency. In order to properly use the role that classroom testing plays in the teaching process, teachers must be fully aware of its significance. They should also be proactive in addressing problems and implementing constructive adjustments. In the organization and implementation part, a proper combination of long-term and short-term objectives of the classroom test should be worked out. Then the test can be incorporated into the overall teaching program so that it can become an indispensable part of the teaching process. In the proposition part, teachers should fully reflect the flexible and varied characteristics of test, diversifying question types, broadening the knowledge and paying attention to the enhancement of the students' overall language skills. Differences in the learning ability can still be tested by setting the questions in a hierarchical manner to protect the learning motivation. At the same time, the test without detailed evaluation is incomplete, for this kind of small-scale test, reflection and backwash study on the teaching should not be based on the results of the test only. The standard according to teaching objectives is more essential than the fixed grades. All in all, the diagnostic classroom test can to some extent realize the benign development of English teaching and learning if it is properly employed.

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